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AUTHOR Smith, Patricia
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ABSTRACT

In the area of textbook selection, a school board should (1) establish a policy based on the feelings of the community, the law, and the board's views; (2) determine whether administrative guidelines reflect board policy; (3) check whether textbook choices are based on those guidelines; and (4) consider appeals in book complaint cases. Everyone agrees that school boards should establish a written policy on textbook selection. This policy should stipulate community involvement, and provision should be made for a written complaint form. When writing a policy, the board should consider its legal authority and recent decisions in relevant court cases. It is wise to have the board's textbook policy checked by an attorney. Another requirement for establishing a textbook policy is that board members should clarify their own thinking and be prepared to counter some of the arguments against board involvement in textbook selection. It is difficult for a board to adopt any regulations that inhibit teacher choice for fear of being labeled a "book burner." Nevertheless, it is the board's obligation to ascertain its constituents' wishes and to represent those wishes in a fair and legal manner. (Author/JG)

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Remarks by

MRS. PATRICIA SMITH
Worthington City Schools
Worthington, Ohio

THE BOARD'S ROLE IN TEXTBOOK SELECTION

(Clinic A-11)

Annual Convention Clinic Session
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Because I feel that some teachers have exceeded their authority and used poor judgment in the selection of books, that the majority of parents do not approve of these more objectionable materials, that these same parents have been effectively squelched in a variety of ways, that many board members would like to curb the excesses, but have abdicated their responsibility because they are intimidated by the near certainty of being labeled with unkind epithets and castigated by the professional educators and their literature, I would like to take the position that the school boards do indeed have a role in textbook selection, that that role is one of establishing a policy and that such a policy just might, after careful consideration, support those who contend that we could use a little so-called censorship. Heaven knows, they have had precious little support up until now.

I feel in the question of textbook selection a board of education has four responsibilities:

1. It should establish a policy based on the feelings of the community, the law and its own study and reflection.
2. Boards should determine whether administrative guidelines carry out their policy.
3. At textbook selection time, they should check to see whether the textbook choices were indeed based on those guidelines.
4. Boards consider appeals on book complaint cases that have not been handled to everyone's satisfaction at a lower level.

Since the last three items are self-explanatory, I will be dealing with the first one - the board's responsibility in establishing a policy.

Everyone seems to agree that boards should establish a written policy on textbook selection. To quote from the July issue of the American School Board Journal, "In textbook selection as in other curricular issues, a balance must be achieved among three interests: the right of the teacher to exercise judgment in his work. the right of the student to learn in a climate of freedom, and the right of the parent and the community to decide what their schools should do and in some

respects how their schools should do it. Without clear, written policies - ones that accurately reflect the communities needs and wishes, achievement of that balance is virtually impossible."

There is no difficulty in drafting a policy if the teaching staff and the community are in agreement as to what is appropriate - regardless of where they are on the permissive-restrictive spectrum. The challenge comes when they disagree.

Many professionals feel that the board's policy should give them sole authority to make all curricular decisions but there is an increasing clamor on the part of parents to have a bigger voice in all school matters and textbooks are no exception. In a recent Gallup poll, 33% of the parents thought they should have a great deal to say about their children's books and 43% thought they should have some.

Not too long ago, U.S. Commissioner of Education, T. H. Bell, said that "parents have a right to expect that the schools in their teaching approaches and selection of instructional materials will support the values and standards their children are taught at home and if the schools cannot support these values they must at least avoid deliberate destruction of them. Parents have the ultimate responsibility for the upbringing of their children. The schools authority ends where it infringes on this right. We must pay more attention to parents values and seek their advice more frequently."

So board members need to establish a policy which stipulates community involvement and then the Superintendent can devise administrative methods to implement it.

In our district, we are in the process of conducting a needs-assessment survey to determine the desires of our patrons on many school issues. On this survey there is a question dealing with textbook selection. It is: "In some classes, students may read many types of books representing varying points of view. Attempts have been made to select the best possible books. How should Worthington schools select reading materials?

1. Careful selection must be made to stress accepted national values, religious viewpoints and moral standards.

2. All books should be available with consideration to the ages of the student.
3. Students should be allowed to read books about many different political, moral and religious philosophies.
4. No opinion.

The parents are to choose one. When I ran for school board, I passed my own and on the question "should students be required to read books containing strong profanity or explicit sex", 73% of the parents said no.

So surveys are one method of determining community thinking.

1. Some regulations call for lay participation on textbook selection committees and or on committees to make decisions on books that have been questioned.
2. Another way of avoiding problems is to make parents aware ahead of time that a book or course may be objectionable and give the parents a choice.
3. Parents might also be given the opportunity to present a written, signed statement to the principal of the school listing a book or books that are objectionable to them and requesting that if these books are assigned to their children, their children be given an option.
4. Richard Zbaracki, Professor of English and Education at Iowa State University, suggested trying a questionable book by a jury selected at random.

Also, provision should be made for a written complaint form. I would not suggest using the National Council of Teachers of English form as I feel this is intimidating to parents but it can be adapted.

I do think that, before adoption, boards should submit policy drafts to the teaching staff for their perusal. The majority of teachers just might approve or have some good suggestions, and even if they don't, the board will be operating in an open manner.

When writing a policy, the board's second consideration is its legal authority in the state and how recent court cases throughout the country have been decided.

It seems that most legislatures relegate textbook selection to the local school boards and I know of no court decisions that have infringed upon the right of school

boards to select textbooks. Our Ohio state statute says that the local board shall determine which textbooks shall be used in the schools under its control. In Ohio we also have a new criminal code with a "harmful to minors" section.

In a recent court case in our state, a school board was sued for allowing Manchild in the Promised Land and One Flew Over the Cuckoo's Nest into the curriculum. I might add that this same school board with two different members had been previously sued for banning God Bless You, Mr. Rosewater. In the latter case, tried in the U.S. District Court, the judge upheld the board's obligation and responsibility to select textbooks. In the former case, a common pleas judge, basing his decision on our new criminal code, found, and I quote, "While a court will ordinarily decide whether a work taken as a whole lacks serious literary, artistic, political, or scientific value such determination need not necessarily be made in identical context where juveniles are involved. The authors themselves never intended these novels to be designed or used as textbooks. The court is required to determine whether the material is offensive to prevailing standards in the adult community with respect to what is suitable for juveniles. It is difficult to think of any material except the hardest of hard core pornography that the legislature intended to outlaw if not such as the subject book. The court does find that each of these books is offensive to prevailing standards in the adult community with respect to what is suitable for juveniles. The court further finds that said books are harmful to juveniles and their use as to juveniles should be enjoined. It obviously was the intention of the state legislature to place the primary responsibility for what juveniles should see or read on their parents." The judge refused to allow the book in the general curriculum but consented to have it used in one course entitled "Street Literature" which the school offered. The students taking the course are required to have written parental permission. I might add that both these cases are under appeal and so far have cost that board $15,000. Concerning parental permission, the decisions have been divided but the majority of cases uphold parents' rights. A case in Illinois said that compulsory education does not deny a parent all control of the

education of his child. A case in Oklahoma said that a parent may make reasonable selection from the prescribed studies for his child to pursue. A case in California said that a parent may on reasonable grounds have a child excused from taking studies or exercises not desired. But another case in Illinois said that a parent cannot insist that his child be allowed to use a textbook different from that adopted. A case in Massachusetts ruled"with the greatest respect to parents, their sensibilities are not the full measure of what is proper education." In the summary of an article on academic freedom in the schools which appeared in the National Organization of Legal Problems of Education's School Law Journal in 1973, the author stated in part "There are important limits to freedom of expression which teachers and students alike should observe in the classroom setting. First the materials to be sanctioned must be appropriate to the age and maturity of the students' level of development. Second to win constitutional protection presentation of the questionable material must be aimed at achieving a reasonable and defensible educational objectives. Third, teachers are subject to reasonable limitations placed upon them by their employers and superiors using community standards of propriety in the doing."

Mr. M. A. McGhehey of that organization said the important thing to remember is that school boards must have uniform standards. He cited a court ruling that a school board could not fire a teacher for using the same words in class that were in books they had approved for their library shelves.

It seems only sensible to have your present policy, if you have one or any new one that you may write, checked by an attorney.

The third requirement for establishing a textbook policy is that board members must clarify their own thinking. Since you so often hear only the professional's views and perhaps you would like some ammunition to combat them, I would like tc counter their arguments.

Their favorite, of course, is that teachers must be accorded full academic freedom. To quote from the American School Board Journal, "A public school

teacher's right to academic freedom is never absolute. It cannot be equated with academic license. Public school teachers have no right to say and teach anything they like. Rather, they have a responsibility to support and help their students achieve the educational goals and objectives for which the community, through its school board, holds its public schools responsible."

If we fail to approve every book that is recommended, we are for censorship and book-burning. These are very emotional words that conjure up negative feelings that all our free thought is going to be suppressed if one book or a few books are not allowed into curriculum. The notion that we have to have only two alternatives, total license or repressive censorship that would destroy all of our freedom, is irresponsible. We are not talking about the suppression of ideas and opinions, we are talking about the language and style with which they are presented.

I equate censorship with the government not allowing a book to be written or published. We are not dealing with such an issue. We are simply saying that not every book published should be read by any student at any level at any time and a few, a very few books, should not be allowed in a public school at all. What we are really dealing with is judgment, not censorship. If a teacher decides to delete a book because it is racist or sexist, that is professional selection. If a parent wants to omit material because it contains four-letter words, that is censorship. Remember, censorship is a political term, not a legal one.

The very people who scream book-burner and frighten people with the spectre of Nazi totalitarian regime never stop to consider that teachers themselves are in a sense an instrument of the state and they are trying to deny parents individual freedom to decide what is best for their child. Does the state through its institution of compulsory education have the power to intervene further in the lives of children - well beyond its traditional mandate? The real issue occurs when the teacher and parent disagree over what is appropriate for a child. Who has the prevailing right to decide? By the way, the very people who scream book-burner are the ones who favor a preponderance of contemporary literature, much of which

is very nihilistic in its approach. These individuals should recall that is was, in part, the nihilism that existed in pre-Nazi Germany that allowed that regime to perpetrate those horrors against human beings and burn all those books in the first place.

We have a movie rating system in this country based on the premise that parents should decide what their children should see. Perhaps teachers should view the books they are assigning as possible movies, and, if the rating is more than a G, seek parental guidance.

Third argument - One book or a few books will not corrupt a child. I happen to believe that people who argue that books can have no negative effect would also have to agree that they can have no positive ones, that no one was ever improved by a book, that art is trivial, and education, irrelevant. In chapter six of what Reading Does to People, the authors quote studies to show that reading can change attitudes and that the less the reader knows about the complexities of the subject, the greater the change in the attitude will be. Another study showed that even small amounts of reading, fifteen minutes, can produce an attitude change that will be measurable at the end of eight months and that the memory of reading is seldom completely blotted out. T. S. Eliot, in The Human Parrot, points out the following: "The fiction that we read affects our behavior toward our fellow man, affects our patterns of ourselves. When we read of human beings behaving in certain ways with the approval of the author, who gives his benediction to this behavior by his attitude toward the result of the behavior arranged by himself, we can be influenced toward behaving in the same way." He argues that the author of a work of imagination is trying to affect us wholly as human beings, whether he knows it or not, and we are affected by it as human beings, whether we intend to be or not.

Most of the objectional material appears in contemporary novels, many times ostensibly selected because they are easier to read. Eliot says about such works, "they may have the greatest and least suspected influence upon us. It is the literature which we read with the least effort that can have the easiest and most insidious influence upon us."

Dr. Robert Goldenson, a psychologist, states in The Encyclopedia of Human Behavior:

"The adolescent identifies with heroes in stories and gains vicarious satisfaction from associating himself with these heroes. He uses them as models in constructing his 'ego ideal'- the self he would like to become. In their search for security and approval, adolescents are particularly prone to hero worship. One of the most important problems in guiding them is to keep their eyes on positive, inspiring models."

Ernest van den Haag, psycholanalyst and philosophy professor, says "Books influence what we feel, what we love and hate, indulge or restrain, cultivate or repress, and finally, what actions we take."

Another argument is that the National Council of Teachers of English, the American Library Association, and other professional experts have recommended certain books. Don't let yourself be intimidated by such seemingly knowledgable sources. These groups on a national level are extremely liberal and permissive. Even Newsweek magazine took the National Council of Teachers of English to task recently saying that one of their documents was more a political tract than a set of educational precepts. It is comforting to know that many of their members on local levels do not agree with all their leaders' pronouncements.

The argument that I hear which I take the greatest exception to is that students are exposed to all this objectionable material outside the school, and use all those four-letter words so why not allow such material in the classroom.

It would seem to me that if they are so inundated with it outside of school that is all the more reason for not providing them with any more. If a younster reads something under the covers with a flashlight, he knows that it is wrong and that society does not condone his behavior. If he reads it in school, he feels his society thinks that this is appropriate for him. I would like to quote from Professor Harry M. Clor in Obscenity and the Public Morality.

"People are influenced by what they think others believe and particularly by

what they think are the common standards of the community. There are a few individuals among us whose basic beliefs are the result of their own reasoning and whose moral opinions do not require the support of some stable public opinion. The free circulation of obscenity can in time lead many to the conclusion that there is nothing wrong with the values implicit in it. Since their open promulgation is tolerated by the public, they will come to the conclusion that public standards have changed or that there are no public standards. Private standards are hardput to withstand the effects of such an opinion."

There is also the point that it is true that students can avail themselves of the obscene material that is so freely available on the market today but they do not assume that parents know or approve of their doing so. However, if they are able to avail themselves of such material in the schools, they assume their parents' tacit approval.

The last argument I would like to deal with is the one that we must teach students about the real world, that we must give them material that is relevant. Since when was it the function of the public school to expose young people to every facet of the seamy side of life. Shall we approve field trips to brothels and gay bars and x-rated movies? What that tact usually means is that we are choosing a book of inferior literary quality because of its social or political message and it is likely to have some objectionable content. I would like to refute this argument with some quotes froma book by James Lynch and Bertrand Evans called the <u>High School English Textbook</u>.

"Although we do not object to the inclusion of contemporary literature, we believe that it should have the qualities to recommend it in addition to its newness, that it should be at least as distinguished as the earlier pieces that it displaces. Furthermore, the classroom provides the opportunity to read what the student may not choose to read on his own with the teachers assistance. He will have a lifetime to read contemporary literature but he may never again have such a favorable opportunity to read anything else."

"The role of the English teacher would seem to be not to prepare a student to read popular literature for which he requires little or no preparation but to show him how to read and to prefer something better. The weakness of such books for use, that is for study, in the classroom is primarily that there is so little to teach because they hardly need to be taught."

"Literature is not to be made attractive to students but students are to be attracted to literature. The latter role is properly the function of the informed and enthusiastic teacher."

"Certain prevalent but nonsensical equations that have long hampered English studies should be abolished: namely, what is great is difficult, that what is difficult is uninteresting, that what is uninteresting is unteachable. Neither editors nor teachers should be afraid of giving students what is good for them. If students knew what was good for them, they would neither need teachers nor textbooks. We must assume that the real basis of education is the assumption that those who know more can give a fair knowledge to those who temporarily know less. The greater gift that English teachers and editors of English books have to give is literature. The vapid theories that advocate teaching the whole child removing all difficulties from his path and being permissive at every turn cannot be allowed to put in jeopardy the literacy of the whole nation."

Newsweek pointed out that one of the reasons Johnny can't write is that he is no longer exposed to the wide range of reading a student must have if he is to learn to write clearly.

Before closing, I do want to point out that I am aware there are parents who go too far and want only the most innocuous of materials, objecting to practically everything. I noticed that their excesses are always used as examples of how ridiculous it is to question books while the really objectionable material is never quoted. I think the public schools have to strive for the middle ground, that which will insure the greatest freedom to the most people. Then those parents who want to expose their children to more mature matter have every right and opportunity to do so

while those parents who do not, have not been forced to.

In summary, it is the responsibility of the school board to establish a policy dealing with textbook selection. It is difficult for boards to adopt any regulations that inhibit in any way teacher choice for fear of being labeled. Nevertheless, it is the board's obligation to ascertain its constituents' wishes, to represent those wishes, to provide for procedures fair to everyone, to determine what will stand up in court in order to save their district future court costs, and to form a considered opinion on this potentially volatile issue that they can comfortably and honestly defend.

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